

A solipsismal analysis of Aristotle's *Poetics*

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Daithidh MacEochaidh and Dai Parsons, at the same time as discounting their book on solipsism from serious consideration, highlight an important distinction that needs to be borne in mind when considering commonplace views of solipsism:¹

"Apologies to those who may have bought this title as a crammer for a philosophy course. Solipsism in these stories is not the problem of other minds, but a creative exploration of those who live too much in their own mind. Here the problem of solipsism is not epistemological, but existential. The isolated characters in this work live under the shadow of solipsism as a problem of life, not of fact."

¹ MacEochaidh, D and Parsons, D. Solipsism for Beginners. Cardigan: Skrev Press, 2003, p vii.

Some of the poetry presented with this essay may tend towards this everyday definition of solipsism, of the egocentric and living too much in one's own mind (*consideration*, *affective variation*, and *affliction* to give some examples). Nonetheless, taking into account *all* of the poetry which has been submitted it should be seen that this inclination towards the everyday represents a strand in a larger *philosophical* viewpoint from which I intend to analyse Aristotle's *Poetics*.

If we are to investigate to what degree Aristotle's *Poetics*² is consistent with solipsism, we need to define our terms. Solipsism encompasses a number of associated philosophies which are not necessarily in agreement with each other. Johnstone³ identifies three major strands of solipsism, each of which may or may not be consistent with other sceptical attitudes which permit of further distinction. The first is identified as *Unreal World Solipsism*, the idea that the world is a dream, illusion or is the product of (usually malevolent) machinations of a superhuman being or daemon controlling our perception. The second is identified as *Observed World Solipsism*, the claim that only the world perceived by the solipsist exists (the everyday aspect of this viewpoint is explored in the poem *The seminar* submitted with this essay). The third is identified as *Internal World Solipsism*, the claim that the world of the solipsist's impressions and ideas are the only reality. Associated with each of these may be *Monopsychic Solipsism*, the denial of other minds. My tentative agreement with *Monopsychic Solipsism* is indicated in the poems *A mirror - held up to him* and *Me and others*. In *A mirror - held*

² Aristotle. *Poetics*. Ed. Heath, M. London: Penguin Books, 1996.

³ Johnstone, AA. *Rationalized Epistemology - Taking Solipsism Seriously*. Ed. Kearns, JT. New York: State University of New York Press, 1991, p.15.

up to him I deny mind to someone that I find unpleasant, although it is obviously only a small and relative step to deny mind to a greater number of people than this on the grounds of the lack of a common frame of reference or even systematic failure of empathy (me being the solipsist that I am). Clearly we cannot analyse Aristotle's *Poetics* on the basis of this wide range of points of view, and need to pick a single one from which to examine (in)consistencies.

It would be too easy a task to reconcile Aristotle's *Poetics* with *Unreal World Solipsism*. The only necessity would be to point out that everything discussed is a dream or illusion and claim that the author was simply paying mind to unrealities whilst awaiting the moment of waking or disillusionment. *Poetics* deals with subjective and also objective facts surrounding tragedy, and as such it might be thought a little too difficult to search for consistencies with *Internal World Solipsism* and its heavy emphasis on the subjective. It might be similarly difficult to reconcile *Poetics* with *Observed World Solipsism*, taking this to its logical conclusions which would mean the discounting of historical and other non-observed phenomena. What I feel would be productive, would be to discuss *Poetics* in the light of my own views on solipsism (which approach *Monopsyche Solipsism*) and are discussed in the last poem of the creative section, *My solipsismal*. Here I try to explain my views on mind (other minds may exist but communication is near impossible), my views on community and language, and also importantly my attitudes towards my project of writing poetry.

It needs to be stated at the outset that Aristotle was no solipsist. J.L. Ackrill writing in *Aristotle the Philosopher* states:⁴

"Such scepticism about the existence of other minds, and sceptical questions about our knowledge of other people's thought and feelings do not worry Aristotle. He takes for granted (here as elsewhere) what we all cannot help taking for granted; he does not try to prove or justify the obvious."

Aristotle was no *Monopsyche Solipsist*, nor was he an *Observed World Solipsist*. To quote Ackrill again:⁵

"In the *De Caelo* Aristotle starts from some very simply and plausible assumptions about matter and movement, and builds up a series of quite sophisticated arguments to establish a certain account of the universe."

This is not the work of a man who believes that objects cease to exist when he ceases to perceive them. I am not trying to reconcile Aristotle's *Poetics* with solipsism because his philosophy agrees with this. I am trying to reconcile *Poetics* with the solipsismal outlook because I believe it to be a productive one which may shed some light on what sections of *Poetics* mean in their relevance to my own poetry.

An important aspect of modern literature is the relationship between the author and her audience. I have looked at some aspects of this in my poem *E.D.* which points towards the work of Emily Dickinson who wrote almost without an audience. Hers would have had to have been a solipsismal view, raising the import of the self, and to some extents

⁴ Ackrill, JA. *Aristotle the Philosopher*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, p 59.

⁵ Ackrill, JA. *Aristotle the Philosopher*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, p 16.

ignoring the external world. Aristotle in *Poetics* would seem to have developed an elitist attitude towards tragedy (and hence a condescending attitude to the audience) which would put his work in line with solipsism. The whole treatise seeks to deify tragedy and put it forward as some elevated intellectual exercise which is almost distinct from the audience. This view is reflected in Aristotle's taste for reading texts over performance:

"By the fourth century tragic texts, as well as those of other kinds of poetry, were becoming more easily and widely available than in earlier periods; a process had started which was to lead to the much more pervasively based book-culture of the Hellenistic age. Aristotle is part of this movement, even though he also has his own coherent case for excluding theatrical considerations from a strict conception of poetic drama."⁶

Aristotle's attitude towards the audience is dichotomous. For instance he recognises the worth of Sophocles who won prizes voted for by the audience in Athens in the 5th century B.C., but on the subject of double plots has the following to say:

"Second best is the structure which some say comes first - that which has a double structure like the *Odyssey*, and which ends with the opposite outcome for better and worse people. It is thought to come first because of the weakness of audiences; the poets follow the audiences' lead and compose whatever is to their taste."⁷

⁶ Halliwell, S. The Poetics of Aristotle. London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1987, p 6.

⁷ Aristotle. Poetics. Ed. Heath, M. London: Penguin Books, 1996 p 22.

The Aristotelian view suggest here (taking into account his admiration of Sophocles) that good tragedy *may* attract the audience but that the audience do not necessarily *know* what good tragedy is. Although this is an elitist viewpoint it is in concordance with the solipsismal attitudes towards the creation of art and also the importance of the subjective put forward in *E.D.*, *Bounds of experience* and *The fleeting glimpse*. If you are going to take the elitist view of art that it doesn't attract a fit audience (the view that Aristotle takes in *Poetics*), then you are going to have to raise the self-worth of the artist in some manner or another (Aristotle does this by intellectualising tragedy) in order to justify the effort of producing the art. This attempt at raising the worth of the subjective is discussed in the poetry that I have mentioned above.

Starting with the poetry of Mallarmé there has been a movement towards increased intellectual "audience participation" in written and performance art. To quote from *Poems for the Millennium* (Volume I) discussing Mallarmé's *A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance*:

"These visual/musical inventions prefigured most of the important moves by poets after him, as did his explorations of 'chance' & open-ended meaning, both of which gave to language and process a share of the authority/authorship previously reserved to the poet."⁸

I mention this because when it comes to the share of language and process in tragedy, Aristotle is at the opposite end of the spectrum. The ideas surrounding language and process are raised, though not answered, in the short poem *process* which is part of my

⁸ Rothenberg, J and Joris, P. Poems for the Millennium, Volume I. London: University of California Press, 1995, p 76.

compositional submission. Aristotle's views on the subject are expressed in what he says of astonishment and surprise in tragedy:

"Tragedy is a *mimesis* not only of a complete action, but also of things arousing pity and fear, emotions most likely to be stirred when things happen unexpectedly but because of each other (this arouses more surprise than mere chance events, since even chance events seem more marvellous when they look as if they were meant to happen - take the case of the statue of Mityls in Argos killing Mityls' murderer by falling on him as he looked at it; for we do not think that things like this are merely random); so such plots will necessarily be the best."⁹

Here as soon afterwards discussing reversal and recognition, Aristotle makes no concessions to the audience. These three (surprise, reversal and recognition) are attributes of the plot, not emotions elicited in those who are watching. When the question is asked in the poem *process* "do i tell a tale? / do you comprehend? / which part more communication?" here Aristotle is saying that the important part of communication is the telling of the tale.

The solipsismal angle is that although art needs to be very well crafted, language is all too often too blunt a tool to use. This is discussed in the poem *Her death* (part of my compositional submission) where the depth of emotion felt by a person can reach the stage where it can no longer be expressed. If, as claimed by Aristotle, language and

⁹ Aristotle. *Poetics* in Classical Literary Criticism. Translated by Hubbard, ME. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p 63-64.

process do not play the role in artistic creation claimed for Mallarmé by Rothenberg and Joris (see above), then it is possible to imbue a piece of poetry with a life of its own, independent of its readership. This in effect is what I have tried to do with each of the poems presented with this submission, each attempting to tell a story in an attempt to describe a specific aspect of my solipsistic beliefs. Each should be capable of standing independently and make a valid point or suggestions towards a clarification. With this attempt I have moved from the stricture of rhyming iambic pentameter to what I refer to as "freer iambic". Before moving to this more personal theme (solipsism) I tried to restrict my poetry to more objective subjects, but in writing about my attitudes towards myself and my solipsism I have altered the form and the metre in which I write, adopting easier modes.

It would be difficult to write an essay on *Poetics* without mentioning *katharsis*. The meaning of the word *katharsis* (in its technical sense) is one that will probably always elude us. To quote Halliwell:

"It had better be said at once that we do not really know what Ar. [Aristotle] meant in this context by *katharsis*. We can be moderately confident only that it offers a response to the Platonic view that tragedy arouses emotions which ought, for the sake of general psychological and moral well-being, to be kept in check (Republic 10, 603-5)."¹⁰

This fact needs to be borne firmly in mind when offering any interpretation of *katharsis*.

¹⁰ Halliwell, S. The Poetics of Aristotle. London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1987, p90.

Commonly encountered theories of *katharsis* take the form of a purification (of pathological excesses)¹¹, the returning to an advantageous mean¹² or an emotional release. All of these in one way or another suggest a disturbance which is acted upon, and some consider that *katharsis* only acts on the pathologically disturbed. This raises the question of who Aristotle is talking about when he states "accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions"¹³. Ancient solipsists have been described as egalitarian in comparison to Descartes (who we will take as a modern yardstick): "Where Descartes asks if *he* is dreaming, Socrates asks if *we* are dreaming. Descartes speaks of *his* impressions, his Greek precursors speak merely of impressions."¹⁴ Further the "deliberately personal approach taken by Descartes to epistemological problems would seem to be quite absent from ancient philosophy prior to Augustine."¹⁵ This is to say that ancient philosophers lack an egocentric bent that seems to have come into being later. What if Aristotle was referring to himself when he spoke of *katharsis*? A Greek modesty and distaste for the egocentric prevented him from saying as much but in speaking of *katharsis* he was speaking of its effects on him and similarly refined people. This would sweep away the idea of disturbance in our understanding of *katharsis* and leave us pondering a very different set of concepts.

¹¹ Heath M. The pleasures of tragedy in Poetics (Aristotle). London: Penguin Books, 1996 p xxxv-xliii.

¹² House, H. Catharsis and Emotions in Aristotle's Poetics. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956 p 100-111.

¹³ Aristotle. Poetics. Translated by Janko, R. Indianapolis / Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987, p 7.

¹⁴ Johnstone, AA. Rationalized Epistemology - Taking Solipsism Seriously. Ed. Kearns, JT. New York: State University of New York Press, 1991, p.13.

¹⁵ Johnstone, AA. Rationalized Epistemology - Taking Solipsism Seriously. Ed. Kearns, JT. New York: State University of New York Press, 1991, p.13.

Keeping the solipsismal firmly in view, I would argue that my solipsismal poetry is perhaps capable of effecting a *katharsis* of pity and fear, just as Aristotle claimed for Greek tragedy. In discussing fear and pity it is best to take Aristotle's definitions:

"I mean, pity has to do with the undeserving sufferer, fear with the persons like us"¹⁶

My poetry deals with suffering, although leaving it to the decision of the reader as to whether that suffering is undeserved. Thus, there is the potential for evoking pity. Fear might be evoked in so far as the reader sees themselves empathising with the actors of the poetry, and to the degree that they might imagine themselves in similar situations. The etymology of the word solipsism comes from the two Latin words "solus" and "ipse" which mean "alone" and "self". Perhaps it is the fear of being alone which is discussed in many of the more self-indulgent poems of the collection, and this is explicitly the case in some of the poems (*a solipsism*, *A tale*, *Isolation*, and *Her death*). If these poems are to be compared with Greek tragedy on the basis that they produce a *katharsis*, it is worth observing that those poems I am referring to describe a personal tragedy, not the heroic tragedy which Aristotle is referring to in *Poetics*.

Aristotle's technical meaning of the word *katharsis* undoubtedly has something to do with understanding. In discussing the importance of *mimesis* in art, he states:

" ... we take delight in viewing the most accurate possible images of objects which in themselves cause distress when we see them (e.g. the shapes of the lowest species of animal, and corpses). The reason for this

¹⁶ Aristotle. *Poetics*. Ed. Heath, M. London: Penguin Books, 1996, p 21.

is that understanding is extremely pleasant, not just for philosophers but for others too in the same way, despite their limited capacity for it."¹⁷

It is precisely this type of understanding which my poetry attempts to encourage. By describing accurately the emotions of those who feel themselves alone ("the lowest species of animal"), it would aim to promote an understanding. And that understanding, if tied in with the emotions of pity and fear on the part of the reader, may lead to *katharsis* (in its healthy sense).

¹⁷ Aristotle. Poetics. Ed. Heath, M. London: Penguin Books, 1996, p 6-7.

